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Laos War 'Secret' Only for Diplomats

By Jack Foisle
Los Angeles Times

UDORN, Thailand — The U.S. Air Force maintains that American planes flying missions over Laos "can only return fire if fired upon."

But to those who know, this is one of the most outrageous fibs of the war and is the source of much comedy at squadron bars.

In fact, U.S. involvement in the war in Laos has become so obvious that it is a "secret" only to American diplomats.

Under the niceties of international agreements applying to Laos, American diplomats do not acknowledge this military participation. Similarly, North Vietnam does not acknowledge that it also has made Laos a battlefield adjunct to the war in Vietnam by moving men and material down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos.

The major stepup in U.S. efforts is the increased use of American aircraft to interdict the roads and trails of the Ho Chi Minh complex in eastern Laos in an effort to stifle — or at least reduce — the North Vietnamese movements of supplies and reinforcements to units in South Vietnam.

Yet, the United States maintains the fiction of conducting only reconnaissance flights over Laos.

In fact, the other day the U.S. Embassy in the capital of Vientiane acknowledged that, since 1964, 71 Americans—69 airmen and two civilians—have been lost in Laos and are presumed to be captive of the Communist Pathet Lao.

All the downed airmen, an Embassy spokesman said, were on "reconnaissance flights carried out over Laos at the request of the Royal Laotian Government."

The decision of President Johnson on March 31 to limit American bombing to areas of North Vietnam south of the 19th Parallel has freed many

aircraft for the bombing of infiltration routes in Laos.

Constriction of the bombing area of North Vietnam has shortened distances to targets. But there has been no lessening of bombing activity from any of the five American air bases in Thailand. In fact, most fighter-bomber squadrons have increased their number of bombing strikes. And more of these can be aimed at Laos.

An entire squadron of F-4 Phantoms—America's latest fighter-bomber—is committed entirely to bombing in Laos.

Three other Phantom squadrons at Udon are committed to the suppression of enemy anti-aircraft fire and stopping truck convoys in either the lower portion of North Vietnam or the eastern length of Laos.

At Udon base there are four more Phantom squadrons. Two carry bombs and rockets. The other two specialize in photo reconnaissance, in which a two-man crew flies unarmed to take pictures from 5000 to 35,000 feet altitude.

Within the presidential limitations on bombing there are further limitations. The narrow southland of North Vietnam known as the panhandle is subdivided. The northern half is reserved for Navy bombing from 7th Fleet carriers. The southern half and Laos are the territory of the Air Force.

Air Force pilots complain about big town areas which are off limits to bomb strikes.

Veteran pilots are barely able to hide their contempt at the type of target they are now assigned.

"We are sent to crater a bend in a dirt road, and we do it," said one. "But in nine hours their antlike peasant labor force will have filled up the craters, and three days from now I'll be committing a million-dollar aircraft and my life to do it again."

In the past, only sorties over North Vietnam counted toward the missions which would send pilots home. Now there are so many missions in Laos that the 100-mission goal

no longer applies. A pilot serves a year regardless of his number of missions.

In the 4½ months since the presidential limitation on bombing to below the 19th Parallel, 23 American aircraft have been shot down. This is roughly half of what would have been expected if the bombing had continued over all of North Vietnam.

The Air Force does not say how many of these planes were shot down in Laos.

There is another type of American military involvement in Laos, well known to the enemy but not to Americans, unless one travels into the remote areas of Laos or visits Nakorn Phanom, another air base located in northeast Thailand. This base has more than 100 planes of various types, all propeller-driven. These planes are used in Laos operations.

A trainer bearing Lao markings with two Americans crashed recently into the Mekong River separating Laos and Thailand, much to the diplomatic embarrassment of the nations concerned.

Although Nakorn Phanom's aircraft fly missions classified as most secret, the base is located in the heart of the most viable Communist insurgency effort in Thailand.

In Laos itself there are some 150 remote sites where the U.S. Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency carry out varied operations.

The more defensible sites contain American military personnel who man aircraft navigational and bombing aids, and activity acknowledged by the Strategic Air Command.

Some of the most advanced sites contain "trail watchers" who report on the infiltration over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their reports are one of the primary sources of the Pentagon reports on enemy buildup in South Vietnam.

The trail watch teams usually contain no Americans. Their capture would contradict the diplomatic stance that the U.S. is not involved militarily in Laos.

The trail watchers usually are Thai or Lao.

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